

well. In 1949 he presented the basic concept in his book 'Semantography'. He derived the name of the system from two Greek words, 'semantikos' standing for 'significant meaning' and 'graphein' for 'to write'.

For the design of the symbols, Bliss used an abstract visualization method to represent objects and emotions. A clock face, for instance, stands for time, an eye for seeing and a heart for feeling. Basic signs are combined with symbolic ones. Emotions are represented with arrows pointing in a certain direction. An arrow pointing upwards next to a heart stands for joy, while an arrow pointing downwards stands for sorrow. A multiplication sign next to the water symbol increases it to a lake, and a further one to an ocean. The Semantography rules are very complex and many symbols turn out to be culturally dependent. It therefore seems unrealistic that the system can be learned quickly. Over the years, Bliss tried in vain to convince universities and pedagogues of his system. Like other world language projects, for example Esperanto, Semantography received very little international acknowledgement.

blissymbolics.us  [Pictorial language](#)

Simplicity

The surge of simplicity in a complex world

Markus Frenzl

Objects of everyday use encrusted with ornaments, heavy velvet curtains, muted colours, and drawing room walls smothered with paintings – to understand the surge of simplicity in the 20th century, one must call to mind the aesthetics of historicism. Even machines were concealed under a thick protective cover of craft-like ornaments in response to the changes caused by industrialization towards the end of the 19th century. For the designers of modernism, simplicity therefore also meant the liberation from a glossed-over and dishonest product world and a life that had remained stuck in the past. Almost all design schools

and trends from the end of the 19th until far into the 20th century were reform movements that – in search of a pure and contemporary industrial form, a design appropriate for the material used, perfect function, and freedom from the ornament – also strove for a new conception of mankind and society. Design believed in the promises of the industrial age, predicted a better life and future, and considered simplicity to be the adequate expression of this future. Simplicity thus became a synonym of modernity, as it were.

Today, simplicity usually stands for minimalist forms and the lack of ornaments, for refined reduction aimed at increasing expressivity and, in the ideal case, for concentrating on the essence and content. But it also stands for the anonymous design of paper clips and pencils, for fashion basics like jeans, T-shirts and the 'little black dress', for omnipresent design classics that represent an apparently 'timeless' shape for a line of products. It is also to be found in the images of empty white lofts and is associated with honest and pure materiality. Simplicity signifies asceticism, restraint and an ideal lifestyle already found in Plato or Aristotle. It serves as an explanatory model for the natural sciences, designates perfect construction or simple manufacturing, stands for easy comprehensibility and possibilities of use, networked actions or ecological and resource-conserving aspects.

Simplicity is the key term for solving problems in an increasingly complex world, but at the same time, it continues to be superficial.

For all that often remains in contemporary design is a vague notion of what could be better and more honest – stuck in a 'style' of simplicity.

The call for simplicity is made whenever a certain degree of saturation has been reached. Reduction and minimalism have long become empty phrases in the design industry, and simplicity a rather broad term. 'Less is more', 'reduced to a minimum' or Dieter Rams' dictum 'less but better' have been appropriated by advertising to embellish everything to which 'design' can in any way be connected with the sense of how superior simplicity is.

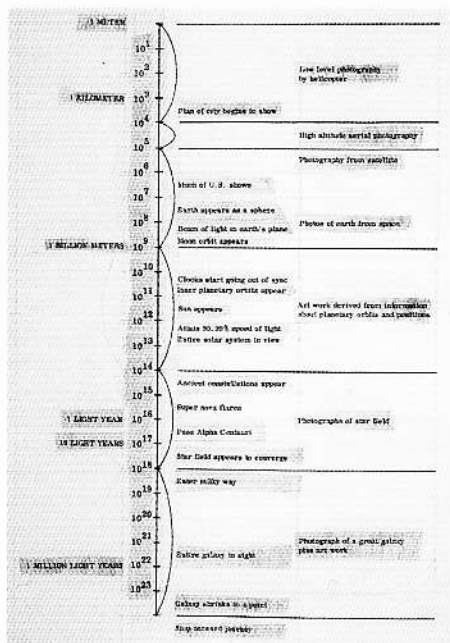


Chart plotting sequences, Powers of Ten, Charles & Ray Eames, 1977

Simple complexity and luxurious simplicity

Especially since design has become more and more detached from the objective world, simplicity must above all be a criterion of clarity and descriptiveness. It is still one of design's crucial tasks to make things, processes and relations – yes, life itself – simple and clear, the way Charles and Ray Eames demonstrated with their well-known film *Powers of Ten* in regard to the entire universe. Simplicity is 'minimized density of complexity'¹¹ and the quest for simple solutions to complex tasks and interrelations. But since formal and content-related categories of simplicity are often mistaken for each other, simplicity is also one of the most unclear criteria used to assess design. The perception of simplicity is always influenced by

subjectivity: 'Simple' can designate the outer appearance of something that is complicated to use, but also a complex product that is easy to use. According to Lucius Burckhardt, 'simplicity of design does not consist in the product revealing little complexity but in the fact that it is linked in a simple way to the conditions of its environment.'¹²

What for a long time counted as an ideal solution in design was a compromise between a visualizing order and complexity demanding activity. The attempt was made to use concepts such as 'height of form' and 'purity of form' to set standards for diversity and the degree of order, with the aim of making simplicity and complexity measurable and assessable. As a criterion of classification, simplicity can be described as 'well-structured', complexity as poorly structured. Hence, complex forms can be well-structured and therefore simple, but also poorly structured and therefore complex. Donald Judd, the master of Minimalism, put his finger on it by saying that 'complicated, incidentally, is the opposite of simple, not complex, which both may be'.¹³ Ascetic limitation has always been regarded as a sign of concentrating on what is essential, something that makes the examination of the content possible in the first place. For this reason, reduced forms in product design, plain spaces furnished with raw materials in interior design, or the white space in graphic design became expressions of sophistication and intelligence. During the course of the 20th century, empty space turned from a symbol of poverty into a symbol of intellectualism, later manifested in the 'white cubes' of art galleries and the empty lofts in big cities, where it is now even a sign of luxury. One can already find simplicity in the Greeks' unembellished items of daily use, a simplicity going beyond that of everyday objects.

Simplicity soon indicated intellectual distinction and expressed an elegance that does not indulge in mere representation but conveys a subtle understatement. Today, it costs a lot to buy one of the functionalist classics, which then serves to communicate one's connoisseurship in view of its subtle codes of simplicity. Luxurious simplicity was always a trademark of Mies van der Rohe and today distinguishes fashion labels such as Jil Sander, Prada, Helmut Lang, or Filippa K: 'The perfection of simplicity transfigures abstinence to the exactitude of taste'¹⁴, as Ulf Poschardt put it.

In many areas, simplicity has changed from a program of classlessness to a style serving to distinguish oneself and conspicuously display luxury. When searching for authenticity, simple things like fresh air or good bread, but also unspoiled nature, silence, time, and unattainability, turn into new forms of luxury. What Oscar Wilde asserted more than a hundred years ago, again appears topical today: 'I adore simple pleasures, they are the last refuge of the complex.'⁵

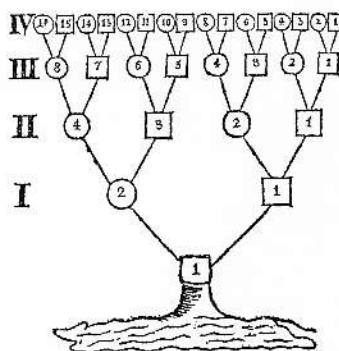
Symbolic simplicity in times of 'featuritis'

Ever since the inception of modernism simplicity has also been considered an expression of intelligent design, and it is a well-known saying of designers that simplicity is particularly hard to achieve, or that the simplest form of a product almost always implies complicated manufacturing.

The fact that the conveyed meaning of simplicity often plays a more important role than its functionality was already revealed by furniture classics such as the Ulm Stool by Max Bill, Hans Gugelot and Paul Hilding, which was designed in 1954 for the then newly-founded HfG Ulm. Its simplicity was detrimental to its practical functions, but it lent the piece an ascetic impression that purported to be 'functionalist' without actually being so. Many designs of Adolf Loos as well, who with his essay 'Ornament and Crime' from 1908 went down in the annals of design history, today appear much less radical and more ornamental than one would expect of the person who came up with the concept of dispensing with ornaments once and for all. His designs were relevant particularly due to the way they conveyed simplicity. The simple facade of his 'Haus am Michaelerplatz' in Vienna from 1910 was an insult to bourgeois representation and the due respect expected, since it stood directly opposite the Vienna Hofburg, the residence of the Emperor. Indeed, what is simple often requires a break, a subtle turn towards complexity or something conveying a sense of value to avoid making a banal or cheap impression: The Ulm Stool, for example, would be a trite Ikea object without its rod penetrating and linking the outer boards.

Compared to these simple forms and functions, the world of the Internet and databases, with its hypertext structures, nested hierarchies, networks, and cross-references, seems to be the exact opposite of simplicity – although it, too, is based on a very simple system of 'yes'

or 'no', 'on' or 'off'. For a long time, easily accessible information consisted in the simple linearity of a text, readable from beginning to end, in a logical succession of comprehensible thoughts. Infinite data volumes, however, can only be processed by the computer, and the amount of information that can be at least hypothetically evaluated by humans is constantly increasing. When the project of 'modernism' appeared completed, the issue of 'simplicity' seemed almost over and done with. But simplicity and the reduction of complexity have now become central tasks again in information design: The goal here is to reduce the amount of information to a comprehensible level, to master the senseless proliferation of functions – something that one might best describe as 'featuritis' – in user interface design, and to make the actions taken understandable in the first place. For digital technologies not only combine ever more functions in one product, the individual actions – in contrast to mechanical products – are no longer visible. They take place in a 'black box' whose capacities must first be visualized. For this reason, an analogy stemming from the material world, the metaphor of a desktop with a bin and files, paved the way for the triumphant success of the computer as a mass medium.



Ancestral table in the form of an ascending family tree, Universal-Lexikon, H. A. Pierer, 1840

Searching for condensed information

It is difficult to establish universally valid rules for simplicity, which in the end always remain subjective. The ten laws of simplicity published by John Maeda in his book from 2006, 'The Laws of Simplicity', offer no solutions or rules in terms of perceptual psychology, but, as he

himself maintains, thoughts on understanding design when seeking simplicity.

Systematic design, understood as systematic thinking and filtering of information by designers, stands, in content-related terms as well, in the tradition of simplicity as the expression of the intellect and thus a notion of design that grasps simplicity not as a formal trend but as a criterion relevant to the content. Particularly in times of increasing information density, criteria such as clarity and simplicity have again become necessary to make the amounts of data, information and impressions recordable and comprehensible, or even accessible in the first place for the individual human being: Analogies to forms such as the family tree or the knowledge tree visualize complex interrelations and simultaneously cite forms or models of representation that have been familiar for centuries.

The absolutely simple, reduced interface of the Google search engine can probably be seen as the main reason for the company's worldwide success. With its one entry field and two buttons, it has become the epitome of the contrast between interface simplicity and deep complexity described by the fashionable neologism 'simplicity'.

The filtering of information, which appears necessary to attain simplicity, is one of the great challenges but also one of the biggest risks. The degree of control or even manipulation that can be exerted by strongly filtering information is revealed by daily newspapers such as the German tabloid 'Bild' or the British 'Sun' that condense information to populist assertions and thus shape the opinion of entire nations. But the fact that the lack of filtering can also pose a threat is something one notices when the tyre pressure happens to be a bit low and the car's on-board computer sends the message 'tyre damage'.

Simplicity can also be understood as condensed information instead of filtered information.

It makes complexity understandable instead of eliminating it.

It is of minor importance whether a simple form of appearance is created in the process, since a more complex form of appearance can also express contentual simplicity.

Take the 'tag cloud', for instance, that visualizes the frequency of search for terms or articles on homepages. It is not simple in formal terms, with its numerous different type sizes, yet these different type sizes enable one to intuitively grasp the weighting – and this can be called simple. Many things that in the world of design naturally counted as a necessity and a possibility to simplify things have long drifted to the opposite: Miniaturization, for instance, not only leads to products that can be transported more easily, but also to ones like the tiny mobile phones that just cannot be handled anymore due to the limitations of the human body. In this context, operating simplicity can mean deliberately keeping a familiar appearance and a scale adapted to the human body, even though this is no longer technologically required. But it can also mean finding a completely new form of using a product, for example, a mobile phone no longer operated with the hands but via gestures or language.

Answers to increased complexity

Apple's success, for instance, lies not only in the hardware design, which time and again causes critics to make fun of Apple fans who pay a lot of money allegedly just for a more stylish casing. It lies in the intelligently and logically designed program and system interfaces, which can be intuitively grasped even by untrained persons, and above all in the intelligent networking of the company's various programs and products: The iPod is not only a well-designed piece of hardware requiring only a few buttons that make it easy to use; it was also the first product that could be simply connected to the iTunes music player on the computer, which in turn can directly access the Apple store, thus forming a self-contained system (and sealing itself off to the outside). Apple Remote is an example

of how a shift in complexity can lead to more operating simplicity: With just a few buttons it seems to allow only basic functions, while in fact making accessible the full functionality of various applications whose complexity is completely transferred to the screen. Many Apple products have led to a gradual change in the public's understanding of design – away from regarding only the hardware, towards the comprehension of a discipline that links hardware, software and the actions of the user.

Increased complexity – in virtual worlds as well as in urban space or the world of digital products – has led to a tremendous retro trend in the past years that seeks to offer visual support in confusing times by resorting to forms that are tried and tested. Where modernism attempted to detach itself from traditions, design in the digital age consciously takes up familiar and traditional features: The 'new simplicity' in product design in the 1990s, for instance, responded with a radical simplification of forms, often referring to classical modernism or seeking out archetypal shapes. Jasper Morrison's 'Ply Chair' from 1989, which marked the beginning of the 'new simplicity' movement, appears almost like a child's drawing of a chair.

But in the past few years, product design has no longer responded to complexity with a counter-model, it has instead consciously taken up themes such as overlapping, connecting, layering, or breaking. Designers have started to integrate into their designs the complexity of the world, the influences of different cultures or themes such as networking. With their designs, they tell stories of uses and actions, traditions and cultures, and have rediscovered the ornament as a means of expression as well as traditional craft techniques. Their designs play with the aesthetics of imperfection, the fractal or crystallinity, and cite the aesthetics of network structures or grid models.

The vision of a simpler future

The constant progress technology is making still gives rise to the hope for increased simplicity, for example, through intuitive operating methods such as voice recognition. 'More technology does not mean more complexity, to the contrary. More computing power means more simplicity,'⁶ as Douglas Adams stated. If one grasps simplicity as the alternative model to existing complexity, it can also be an alterna-

tive model to the digital in the information age. Simplicity is then no longer just formal reduction or enhanced functionality, but also – arising from the demand for authenticity – the symbolic adherence to what is material, familiar and concrete. When searching for simplicity, large areas of the objective world, in contrast to the virtual world, will thus be newly appraised in the future. At the same time, simplicity as a method of structured thought and design will probably newly invent the future and seek to make what is new accessible, clear and easy to use.

The timelessness and unlimited validity of something deemed a maximally simple design, however, is a misapprehension in face of which modernism already failed: As a symbolic concept, simplicity is always subject to the taste of the times; formally, it always sets itself off from what presently counts as complex; with regard to functionality it is dependent on the respective technological possibilities and what people are familiar with in terms of use.

Hence, what is regarded as simple always depends on the time and context.

And so a design that for us today appears to be the epitome of simplicity and of which copywriters say that 'less is impossible', may in a few years seem as complicated, non-functional and encrusted with ornaments as the objects in the times of historicism did to the then dawning discipline of design. Simplicity constantly invents itself anew, and in its search for the ideal, for perfection, functionality, easy comprehensibility, clarity, and timelessness, it will most likely always remain an unreachable utopia that for ever spurs on designers.

1 Jürgen Fiedler: 'Einfachheit – Untersuchungen zu einem elementaren Kalkül', Inaugural dissertation to obtain the doctorate at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Free University Berlin, Berlin 1982, p. 7

2 Lucius Burckhardt: 'Einfachheit ist nicht einfach', in: 'bewusst, einfach. Das Entstehen einer alternativen Produktkultur',

exh. cat. of the Instituts für Auslandsbeziehungen e. V., no place of publication, 1998, p. 85

3 Donald Judd, 'Möbel Furniture', Zürich 1986, unpagged

4 Ulf Poschardt: 'Anpassen', Hamburg 1998, p. 41

5 Oscar Wilde, quoted in: Stuckenschmidt, H. H.: 'Die Einfachheit des Komplizierten', Berlin 1966, p. 5

6 Douglas Adams, in 'Die Leute lernen nicht': Interview mit Science-Fiction-Autor Douglas Adams über die Zukunft des Internets und wie es die Welt verändern wird', in: Der Spiegel, No. 32, 1997, p. 141



Skur, Hiob, Austrian painter, *Blackburn February 22, 1940, † (suicide) Klagenfurt February 2, 2000; became acquainted with Nero Gris, a son of Juan Gris, in 1959 in Trieste and then began to work as an artist; his early works were close to Arte povera (Hungerkünstler cycle, 1966); in 1968 he was one of the initiators of the 'Contra' group, whose manifesto 'Voi ch'ascoltate in rime un sospirone' (1969) he translated into German; taking up the works of Ad Reinhardt and Wolfgang Paalen. He founded the so-called 'Schwarzmalerei' that is characteristic for its miniature monochrome pictures, which Skur painted with gloomy colours he produced himself from burnt flotsam; he also created a (now lost) installation titled 'Schwarzarbeit'.



Snelting, Femke, *1969, artist and designer. Together with Renée Turner and Riek Sijbring she forms De Geuzen, a foundation for multi-visual research. De Geuzen deploy both on- and offline strategies to explore their interest in female identity, critical resistance, representation, and narrative archiving. With Pierre Huyghebaert and Harrison, she initiated the design and research team Open Source Publishing (OSP). OSP tests out in practice how graphic design could work differently, using

F/LOSS software and open content licenses.

What is your favourite search engine?

shoogle.org, a project by Tsila Hassine. It finds everything that Google finds, but treats the results equally.

What is your favourite encyclopaedia? [Wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org), because a printed encyclopaedia rarely gives access to the history and production of knowledge.

What is your favourite library? [Project Gutenberg](http://Project Gutenberg.org). The collection consists of more than 25,000 digital books available in the public domain. Stored in plain format, these texts have now become true source material.

What is your information filter? Depending on what I am looking for, I view source, use a search engine, a map, notes I penciled in books, my colleagues, the label on the item I am about to buy, a recipe database, a man page.


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[Standards](http://standards.org)

Spectrum Publishers, or Uitgeverij Het Spectrum, Dutch publishing house known for its [encyclopaedias](#), [dictionaries](#) and non-fiction books. The house was established in 1935 in Utrecht (NL) and since 1999 it has been part of the Dutch publishing corporation PCM Uitgevers, which also owns several large Dutch daily newspapers.

Spectrum Publishers publishes non-fiction books under the trade name 'Spectrum', encyclopaedias under 'WinklerPrins' and dictionaries and learning software under 'Prisma'. In the 1970s the publisher developed in collaboration with the British publisher Mitchell Beazley the 'Grote Spectrum Encyclopaedia'. At the time, the 24-volume edition counted as the most sophisticated encyclopaedia in terms of design. The rapid development of digital media and the Internet in the 1990s prevented the complete publication of a second edition.

Today, the Winkler Prins Encyclopaedia is the publisher's best-known product and also the most important Dutch-language reference work of its kind. It was once a printed work and now forms the basis of the Dutch-language multimedia [Encarta Encyclopaedia](#) produced in cooperation with the American firm Microsoft.

spectrum.nl  [Systematic design](#)